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Interview on ABC's This Week with George Stephanopoulos

Secretary Condoleezza Rice

Washington, DC

March 13, 2005

(9:00 a.m. EST)

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: And we begin with the Secretary of State. Welcome, Madame Secretary.

SECRETARY RICE: Thank you. It's nice to be with you.

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: Syria. President Assad told the UN envoy yesterday that he will withdraw his troops in two stages, about a third of them by the end of March and the rest at an unspecified date. Does that meet President Bush's conditions?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, George, we first have to hear from Mr. Larsen and we will get the reports from him.

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: The UN envoy.

SECRETARY RICE: Yes, the UN envoy. Obviously, there are some positive elements to this. It is positive that Syria would begin to withdraw its forces out of Lebanon, not just to the border. But we are going to continue to press for full compliance with Resolution 1559.

The key here is to remove from Lebanon the artificial impact of Syrian forces and Syrian intelligence offices. And I will note too that Mr. Larsen apparently got a pledge that this would include intelligence forces, and that's very important.

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: The question is who fills that vacuum if the Syrian troops do, indeed, withdraw. Can the Lebanese army handle it? Can they stabilize the country? Or do we need to increase the UN force?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I'm quite certain that the Lebanese people may need some help in what is going to be a period of getting ready for elections, and then we will see what is needed after elections. But I can be certain that the international community is ready to provide an international framework, if that is what is needed, ready to provide --

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: International forces?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, we will see what the Lebanese need. And again, Mr. Larsen will have to talk with the Lebanese about this. This is going to be driven by Lebanese processes, not by American or French or UN processes. But I can tell you there is enormous goodwill out there for Lebanon to have a complete return to sovereignty, there is enormous goodwill for Lebanon to have free and fair elections and there's enormous goodwill to help the Lebanese in those processes. So I'm sure we'll do whatever is needed.

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: A big player in the Lebanese process is, of course, Hezbollah, and there was some indication this week that perhaps the United States was shifting its stance on Hezbollah. Let me show you what was written in the *New York Times*. It said: "Only a few weeks ago the United States was tangling with France over Hezbollah's status as France blocked an effort by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to have Europe formally label Hezbollah a terrorist group. Now the United States has basically accepted the French view that with Hezbollah emerging as such a force in a very fractured Lebanon it is dangerous to antagonize it right now and wise to encourage the party to run candidates in Lebanese elections."

Has the United States accepted the French view or will the United States insist that Hezbollah disarm before May's elections?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, the United States has not changed its view of Hezbollah. We consider Hezbollah a terrorist organization. But we're concentrating here, George -- and things are happening very fast on the ground here -- but we are concentrating on removing the Syrian presence, the Syrian interference in Lebanese affairs because only then can you have free and fair elections which, in and of themselves, sometimes change the political circumstances on the ground. And then the Lebanese, in a Lebanese process, can come to terms with the various balance of forces in their society.

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: And Hezbollah can be part of that process?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, it's going to be up to the Lebanese to work through the differences and divisions that have been there. But I will say that very often elections themselves have a changing impact on people and on the balance of forces. And it's also important to note that, of course, in the long run you can't have a democratic society and a society based on rule of law where you have groups or organizations that are committed to violence outside of that framework.

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: But we won't -- let me just finish. We won't necessarily insist they disarm before May's elections?

SECRETARY RICE: What our point at this point is 1559 calls for the withdrawal of Syrian forces. It does also call for a dismantlement of militias. But we need to do first things first. When Syrian forces are out we will have a better sense, and more importantly the Lebanese will have a better sense, of how to chart a political future that can be for all Lebanese and representative of the many different divisions that are in that society.

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: Let's turn to Iran. An Iranian envoy was quoted overnight saying the United States is hallucinating if it thinks Iran will give up its nuclear program. Is that just bluster or is Iran going to the Security Council?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, we finally have the spotlight on Iran and what Iran needs to do, and I'm sure that's uncomfortable for the Iranians because they've tried to make this a discussion about what the United States needs to do, they've tried to make it a discussion about splits between the United States and its European allies, and what we've forged with Europe is a common front, a common approach to dealing with Iran that says Iran must not develop a nuclear weapon, that Iran's international obligations must be upheld, and that means they cannot develop a nuclear weapon under cover of civilian nuclear power. It says that if Iran is not willing to live up to those obligations then we will -- there will be a supported referral to the Security Council. I'm sure it makes the Iranians uncomfortable that this united front now puts the spotlight back on what Iran must do.

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: How much time do they have to accept this deal?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, we don't have a timeline here. But given that this has gone on for a while, I would think that if Iran intends to make this strategic choice that they would want to do so sooner rather than later.

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: There is a report in the *London Sunday Times* today that says Prime Minister Sharon of Israel has given initial authorization for a unilateral attack on Iran if this diplomacy fails, and it quotes an Israeli security source saying, "If all efforts to persuade Iran to drop its plans to produce a nuclear weapon should fail, the U. S. administration will authorize Israel to attack." Is there any truth to that report?

SECRETARY RICE: The United States administration is not going to authorize anything here. And clearly we have a diplomatic path ahead of us. The United States has now, with the European allies, put forward, I think, a strengthened now diplomatic hand for the European 3 to play. It really now is up to the Iranians to do what they need to do. Obviously, the President of the United States always has his options open, but we really do believe that this can be resolved diplomatically.

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: But he hasn't given Prime Minister Sharon a green light?

SECRETARY RICE: No, of course not.

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: China. You're on your way to Asia this week. And there were -- are -- more indications that China is taking a more belligerent stance towards Taiwan. Tomorrow they are expected to approve in their assembly a law that would say if Taiwan changes its constitution in any way, China is obligated to attack.

Given that, would you recommend to Taiwan that they reform their constitution?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, we have said to both parties that this is not helpful to have unilateral steps that raise tensions across the -- in the cross-straits situation.

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: And this legislation is one of those steps?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, clearly it raises tensions and it's not necessary or a good thing to raise tensions. The United States has been an upright anchor in this dispute for a long time. We have a "one China" policy. Everybody understands that. The key is that there should be no effort on either side to unilaterally change the status quo.

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: But the premise of U.S. policy for the last 40 or 50 years has basically been as China becomes more prosperous it will also become more peaceful. Do you have to rethink that premise?

SECRETARY RICE: Oh, I think it's far too early to make conclusions about what kind of power China is going to be in international affairs. What we have to do is to engage in policies that strengthen the chances that China will be a constructive force, not a destructive force, and we do that in several ways. First --

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: What are they now?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I think at this point they are a rising force in international politics and there are both healthy aspects and troubling aspects to that. The healthy aspects are that we have good cooperation with China in the war on terror; we have good cooperation with them in the six-party talks to try and deal with the North Korean issue. On the other hand, of course we have concerns about the Chinese military buildup. We have concerns about the cross-straits tensions between China and Taiwan. China's economy is integrating into the international economy; it needs to do that in a rules-based way, according with the WTO obligations that China undertook.

And of course the United States has strong alliances in the region, with Japan, with South Korea, that gives a sense of stability to this region in a military sense, in a political sense, in an economic sense. And so we have many ways of helping to condition an environment in which China can be a stabilizing, not a destabilizing, factor in East Asian affairs. But it is, in part, incumbent on us to make certain that our policies do that.

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: Karen Hughes. She's about to become your Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy. You know, several people have held this job. How will Karen Hughes succeed where others have not? And what kind of power will she have?

SECRETARY RICE: Now, George, you're trying to force me to make an announcement before I've made an announcement, but --

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: Well, it's been all over the news. (Laughter.)

SECRETARY RICE: But let me just talk for a minute about the public diplomacy. It's no secret that the United States needs to revamp its public diplomacy efforts. I'm a student of the Cold War and during that period the United States was really quite good at Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty and Voice of America, very good at getting a message across that was not spin or somehow propaganda; it was the truth. And that was what really did impress the people of Eastern Europe. We had massive exchanges of our people as the Soviet Union was breaking down, as Eastern Europe was being liberated. We had many people, like myself, who went into the study of those cultures and the languages of those cultures.

And after the Cold War much of that apparatus broke down. We don't train the numbers of people that we should in critical languages. This has to be not a monologue with the Muslim world but a conversation, and that means understanding those cultures. And I made a commitment when I was confirmed that the revamping of public diplomacy would be a very high priority for me and I'm seeking the very best people to do that.

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: And it sounds like you're going to get someone very close to the President in Karen Hughes.

One final question. You know, you've been asked this question before but the speculation about you running for President just cannot stop. Look at this website, Rice2008.com. They're now popping up all over the Internet. And when you're asked by the *Washington Times* the other day if you would rule out running for President, you said that's not a fair question. Why isn't that a fair question?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I don't know how many ways to say no, so let me just say it. I don't have any desire to run for President. I don't intend to. I won't do it. I think that --

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: You will not run for President?

SECRETARY RICE: I won't. How's that? Is that categorical enough?

MR. STEPHANOPOULOS: That's about as clear as you can get. Jeb Bush said the same thing last fall. You said it there. That is an absolute statement. A lot of dreams are going to die today, Secretary Rice.

Thank you very much for joining us.

SECRETARY RICE: Thank you, George. Great to be with you.

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